

6/6/04 This is the third draft of the chapter on Starting Hands in Hold'em Brain by King Yao. Please email feedback, suggestions, comments, opinions, questions to KingYao@HoldemBrain.com or you could use the Feedback Form to email me at the bottom of the page.

Hold'em Brain: Starting Hands

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The first step to winning Limit Hold'em is to choose good starting hands to play. The quality of a starting hand is not static. Some hands may be good or bad in different situations. It depends on the other players' actions and your position. This chapter will explain what to look for when deciding what to do with your starting hand.

1326 different combination of hands, but only 169 different quality of hands

There are 1326 different starting hands. This counts $K\clubsuit T\heartsuit$ and $K\spadesuit T\diamondsuit$ as two separate hands. If we did care about the order that we received the two cards in, then there are 2652 different combinations of two card starting hands (52×51). For the first card, we can get any of 52 different cards. For the second card, we can get any of the remaining 51 cards. This method would count $8\clubsuit 7\clubsuit$ as a different hand than $7\clubsuit 8\clubsuit$. However, in Hold'em we do not care about the order that the cards are dealt to us. Since every combination is represented exactly twice, this means we can divide 2652 by 2 to get the number of different combination of hands, and that equals 1326.

These 1326 different starting hands can be separated into three main categories. Pairs ($9\spadesuit 9\heartsuit$), suited hands ($A\diamondsuit 5\diamondsuit$) and unsuited hands ($A\clubsuit 5\spadesuit$).

Pairs

There are 13 different pairs, ranging from AA down to 22. There are six different possible combinations for each pair. The six different combinations for AA are:

$A\heartsuit A\diamondsuit$	$A\diamondsuit A\clubsuit$
$A\heartsuit A\clubsuit$	$A\diamondsuit A\spadesuit$
$A\heartsuit A\spadesuit$	$A\clubsuit A\spadesuit$

Since there are 6 different combinations for each pair, and there are 13 different pairs, that means 78 out of the 1326 different hands are pairs or 5.9% of all hands.

Suited Hands

There are 78 different suited hands. Some examples are $A\heartsuit K\heartsuit$, $A\heartsuit 5\heartsuit$ and $Q\heartsuit J\heartsuit$. How did I get 78 different hands? One way is to look at the number of suited combinations with each card. If we take the $A\heartsuit$ first, there can be 12 different suited hands with the $A\heartsuit$, ranging from $A\heartsuit K\heartsuit$ down to $A\heartsuit 2\heartsuit$ (there are 13 cards of each suit, but since AA can not be a suited hand, there are only 12 suited hands with the $A\heartsuit$). With the $K\heartsuit$, there are also 12 different combinations, but one of them is already counted for with the $A\heartsuit$. This means there are only 11 additional different

suited cards with the K♥. Subsequently, the Q♥ has 10 different new combinations, and so on until we get to the 3♥, which only has one new combination, 3♥2♥. Adding them up (12+11+10+9+8+7+6+5+4+3+2+1), the total number is 78 different hands with each suit. There are four different suits, so that means there are 312 different suited hands (78 x 4). This reflects 23.5% of all hands.

Unsuited Hands

There are 78 different hands of each combination of unsuited hands. But instead of 4 different suits, there are 12 different suit combinations. For example, AK can come in 12 different unsuited ways:

A♥K♣	A♥K♠	A♥K♦
A♦K♣	A♦K♠	A♦K♥
A♣K♦	A♣K♠	A♣K♥
A♠K♣	A♠K♥	A♠K♦

This means there are 936 different unsuited hands (78 x 12) or 70.6% of all hands.

Overall, there are 78 different combinations of pairs, 312 different combinations of suited hands and 936 different combinations of unsuited hands. These add up to 1326 total different hands. Here is a table with the full breakdown.

Type of Starting Hand	Different Quality	Different Combinations	Total Number of Hands	Percentage of all Hands
Pair	13	6 possible combinations	78	5.9%
Suited Hand	78	4 different suits	312	23.5%
Unsuited Hand	78	12 different suit combinations	936	70.6%
Total	169		1326	100.0%

In Hold'em, we do not care about the particular suits until after the Flop. For example, before the Flop, A♣J♣ is the same as A♦J♦, and 9♦8♣ is the same as 9♠8♥. It is only after the Flop that these hands may start to diverge in strength, although sometimes they stay the same if flush factors are non-existent after the Flop. This means there are only 169 different hands that can be dealt. You can see this by looking at the above table and add up the "Different Quality" category. When we look at it in terms of 169 different hands, it is important to keep in mind that the different hands have varying weights. A pair has 6 different combinations, a suited hand has 4 different combinations and an unsuited hand has 12 different combinations.

Understanding these factors becomes useful if we can narrow our opponent's hand down to just a few quality hands. For example, it is possible that a tight pre-Flop player will only raise with six different hands from the under the gun position: AA, KK, QQ, AKs, AKo and AQs. With all other hands, it is possible he would either fold or call. Here are the possible combinations these hands could have.

Hand	Possible Combinations	Percentage of the time the under the gun player holds this hand
AA	6	15.8%
KK	6	15.8%
QQ	6	15.8%
AKs	4	10.5%
AKo	12	31.6%
AQs	4	10.5%
Total	38	100%

Since this player will only raise under the gun with those hands, it means he will only be raising under the gun 2.9% of the time (38/1326). If you have played against this player often, it should come as a surprise to you when he does raise under the gun since he does it so seldom.

If you held JJ, you would know that you are in a dangerous position against this specific player. Against AA, KK, QQ, your hand of JJ is a major underdog. Against AKs, AKo, and AQs, it is only a slight favorite. Here is a chart that shows how often you should win if you were all-in before the Flop.

Hand	Possible Combinations	Percentage of the time under the gun holds this hand	Your winning percentage with JJ	JJ's Equity (Third Column x Fourth Column)
AA	6	15.8%	19%	3.0%
KK	6	15.8%	19%	3.0%
QQ	6	15.8%	19%	3.0%
AKs	4	10.5%	54%	5.7%
AKo	12	31.6%	57%	18.0%
AQs	4	10.5%	54%	5.7%
Total	38	100%		38.4%

Note - the information from the fourth column, and all subsequent winning percentage numbers, are from the Texas Hold'em Calculator on Cardplayer.com.

If you assume no other players are going to play and the blinds will fold, then calling this tight pre-Flop raiser is a losing play even with a strong hand like JJ! Assume you are going all-in at this point (meaning you only have three big bets left in your stack), then you are risking three small bets to win four and a half small bets (three from the pre-Flop raiser, one from the big blind and a half from the small blind). This means you would need to win 40% of the time to break even. With these assumptions, the table above shows that JJ only wins 38.4% of the time on average, so in this instance playing JJ is slightly below the goal of 40%.

In practice, JJ is a playable hand even against a tight pre-Flop raiser. Most players will raise with more hands than the ones listed in the previous table and you will have positional advantage. Let's add in AQo, JJ and TT as two other raising hands by this player, and see how JJ fares in that case.

Hand	Possible Combinations	Percentage of the time under the gun holds this hand	Your winning percentage with JJ	JJ's Equity (Third Column x Fourth Column)
AA	6	10.5%	19%	2.0%
KK	6	10.5%	19%	2.0%
QQ	6	10.5%	19%	2.0%
AKs	4	7.0%	54%	3.8%
AKo	12	21.1%	57%	12.0%
AQs	4	7.0%	54%	3.8%
AQo	12	21.1%	57%	12.0%
JJ	1	1.8%	50%	0.9%
TT	6	10.5%	19%	8.5%
Total	57	100%		47.0%

Note - There is only 1 possible combination that your opponent has JJ because you have JJ as well.

Now the average winning percentage for JJ is much higher, jumping from 38.4% up to 47.0%. With the assumptions listed above, JJ now has a high enough of a winning percentage to play the hand. The under the gun raiser is now raising with 4.3% of his hands (57/1326) rather than 2.9%, and this makes a big difference to JJ.

The AQo debate

AQo is an interesting starting hand. Normally it is a high quality hand, and most players will open-raise pre-Flop with it. In some situations, it is a hand that is worthy of re-raising. However, in the same situation as we just discussed in the previous section, the correct decision is to fold! This issue was brought up in John Feeney's book "Inside the Poker Mind" (page 33-34). After his

book was published, this issue was hotly debated on some internet forums.

Here are the assumptions. An early position player open-raises. You know that he plays very tight and will only raise with high quality hands. You know he would raise with AA, KK, QQ, JJ, TT, AKs, AKo, AQs, AQo, JJ and TT (in Feeney's book, he makes different assumptions on possible hands that the open-raiser may have). Your target is to win at least 40% of the time on average against this player. That would be the target for an all-in player. You do have positional advantage but there is also a chance another player holds a strong hand behind you. So using 40% as the target should get you close to the cutoff point.

Hand	Possible Combinations	Percentage of the time under the gun holds this hand	Your winning percentage with AQo	AQo's Equity (Third Column x Fourth Column)
AA	3	6.25%	7%	0.4%
KK	6	12.5%	28%	3.5%
QQ	6	12.5%	30%	3.8%
AKs	3	6.25%	24%	1.5%
AKo	9	18.75%	26%	4.9%
AQs	2	4.17%	48%	2.0%
AQo	7	14.58%	50%	7.3%
JJ	6	12.5%	43%	5.4%
TT	6	12.5%	43%	5.4%
Total	48	100%		34.1%

Note - Because you have AQo, it means there are only 2 other ways to make AQs and 7 other ways to make AQo.

On average, you expect to win 34.1% of the time. This does not meet the 40% threshold in the all-in situation. There is a chance AQo is playable at a level below 40% because of positional advantage and possible poor post-Flop play by the opponent, but 34.1% is so far lower than 40% that playing AQo in this situation just does not make sense.

But what if the same player who raised was in middle position rather than early position? This change in position means that he would add to his list of open-raising hands. Or we could keep the player in the same under the gun position and assume he would raise with more hands. In either case, the key is that the player is also willing to raise with hands that are worse than the hands listed above. Let's say the player adds five other hands to his open-raising hands, and let's say those five hands are 99, 88, AJs, ATs and KQs. The same analysis can be done with these hands included to see how it changes your decision when you hold AQo. Here is the table.

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Hand	Possible Combinations	Percentage of the time under the gun holds this hand	Your winning percentage with AQo	AQo's Equity (Third Column x Fourth Column)
AA	3	4.35%	7%	0.3%
KK	6	8.70%	28%	2.4%
QQ	6	8.70%	30%	2.6%
AKs	3	4.35%	24%	1.0%
AKo	9	13.04%	26%	3.4%
AQs	2	2.9%	48%	1.4%
AQo	7	10.14%	50%	5.1%
JJ	6	8.70%	43%	3.7%
TT	6	8.70%	43%	3.7%
99	6	8.70%	44%	3.8%
88	6	8.70%	45%	3.9%
AJs	3	4.35%	69%	3.0%
ATs	3	4.35%	69%	3.0%
KQs	3	4.35%	70%	3.0%
Total	48	100%		40.5%

Now you can beat your opponent's average hand 40.5% of the time and barely meets the 40% threshold. Playing AQo in this situation is clearly better than in the previous situation.

Starting Hands can Change in Value

There are some hands that you are happy to play in a certain situation but not in another situation.

The variables that can change your decision include your position, previous players' actions and the characteristics of players yet to act. One of the keys to the changing values of hands is whether it is a drawing hand or not. Here are a few examples of hands that you would play differently on certain situations.

AQo

As shown in the previous section, although AQo is usually a re-raisable hand, it should be thrown away if a tight pre-Flop player open-raises in an early position. If the early position player open-raised from middle or late position instead, then you would feel comfortable re-raising. If the early position player who open-raised was not as tight as originally described, then it means he could be raising with worse hands, and thus a re-raise with your AQo is fine.

ATo

In late position when no other player has come in yet, this is a fine hand to steal the blinds with.

Even if any of the blind hands call, ATo is likely the best hand. If the blinds do not call, then you would be happy to win the pot right there. If there is a limper or two, ATo may still be the best hand depending on who the limpers are and what position they are limping in from. However, if there are a lot of limpers, then ATo goes way down in value and becomes a marginal hand. Other players may be limping in with hands such as AQo and AJo, which would dominate ATo. If there is a raise and a couple of callers, ATo is a hand to throw away.

JTs

In early position, some players feel JTs is a good enough of a hand to limp in with and hope to encourage other players to limp in along behind them. Their idea is that their limp may help build the pot as other players are willing to limp along. If that happens, then the player with JTs has put himself in a multiple player pot, a good situation for JTs. In late position, JTs is a hand that has enough value to open-raise to steal the blinds. However if there is just one raise from a reasonable opponent in early or middle position and no other player has called, then it is best to throw this hand away as it does not perform as well in a heads-up pot.

A7o vs 76s

In a heads-up situation, A7o is a better hand than 76s. The first reason is that A7o has the advantage of having the high card. The second reason is that A7o dominates 76s in that when a 7 hits the board, the kicker will usually mean the difference in the hand. However, if there are many other players involved in the hand, then the value of A7o decreases dramatically relative to 76s. In a multiple player pot, A7o will likely be dominated by another hand with an A and a higher kicker. The advantages that A7o enjoyed over 76s in a heads-up situation are have vanished in a multiple player pot. A7o no longer has the high card equity nor is it assured of being the dominating hand. Instead, it is the hand that is more likely to be dominated. On the other hand, in a multiple player pot, 76s does not need to worry about being dominated because it is looking to make a draw with 76s, not a pair. 76s and A7o have changed spots on the relative strength ladder when the situation is changed from a heads-up scenario to a multiple player scenario. With fewer players, A7o is the better hand, with more players 76s is the better hand. Thus A7o is a good open-raising hand from late position to steal the blinds, while 76s is a good hand to play in a cheap multiple player pot.

ATo vs T9s

This match-up is similar to the previous one. In a direct heads-up situation, ATo is far superior to T9s. However, when these hands are in the big blind against an tight early position raiser, T9s is a better hand. In the section on the AQo debate, it is clear that AQo does not play well against a tight early position player. The same reason holds true for ATo in the big blind against a tight early position raiser, even though it only costs one small bet to see the Flop. Also, the problem of being out of position in all future rounds makes it tough to play ATo under these circumstances. On the other hand, T9s has a chance of being a playable hand since it is not dominated by most hands that a tight early position player would raise with. If other players call, T9s will gain even more equity compared to ATo because T9s has drawing qualities and is more likely to be independent from the other callers' hands. Hands that dominate ATo (AK, AQ, AJ) are hands that most players will play most of the time. The same cannot be said for hands that dominate T9s. Here is a table comparing ATo and T9s versus a tight early position player. It shows that T9s is a better hand in this situation and the difference is big enough that calling a raise with T9s is

correct but not with ATo.

ATo ATo ATo ATo					T9s T9s T9s T9s			
Opp.'s hand	Poss. Combos	% Opp has this hand	% ATo wins	ATo Equity	Poss. Combos	% Opp has this hand	% T9s wins	T9s Equity
AA	3	6.5%	8.8%	0.6%	6	10.2%	22.7%	2.3%
KK	6	13.0%	29.1%	3.8%	6	10.2%	21.7%	2.2%
QQ	6	13.0%	29.1%	3.8%	6	10.2%	20.4%	2.1%
AKs	3	6.5%	25.0%	1.6%	4	6.8%	38.7%	2.6%
AKo	9	19.6%	26.6%	5.2%	12	20.3%	41.0%	8.3%
AQs	3	6.5%	25.1%	1.6%	4	6.8%	38.8%	2.6%
AQo	9	19.6%	27.1%	5.3%	12	20.3%	41.4%	8.4%
JJ	6	13.0%	28.8%	3.8%	6	10.2%	19.0%	1.9%
TT	1	2.2%	30.9%	0.7%	3	5.1%	17.6%	0.9%
Total	46	100%		26.4%	59	100%		31.4%

When you are in the big blind against a tight early position raiser, you would prefer a suited connector like T9s or 76s over two high cards like ATo or A9o. In this case, T9s wins 31.4% on average, while ATo only wins 26.4% on average.

Now let's change the position of the open-raiser. Instead of raising from an early position, let's say the tight player was open-raising from the button. In late position, he would be raising with many more hands. He may raise with hands such as A7, KT, Q9, and JT if it is folded to him. Do you see what is happening here? Against these hands, ATo is a much better hand than T9s. ATo is the dominating hand against some of the hands that the button would raise with. On the other hand, T9s now has a much greater chance of being dominated. Also, hands like KJ and QJ (hands that the player on the button would raise, but would not if he was in early position) are favorites over T9s, but are slight underdogs to ATo. ATo is now a better hand than T9s against a raise from the button.

Starting Hands Qualifications

The charts below reflect the recommended action for different starting hands under different situations. Each of these situations are cross-referenced with three different positions, early, middle and late position. This is a guideline only, and the player needs to adapt the strategies on this chart to his specific environment at the time. This is not analogous to a blackjack basic strategy chart where it is crucial to memorize the table. Instead, the importance is on the understanding of the reasoning behind each situation. When you are at the table you can use the same logic to make your decisions.

The hands are categorized in three different general categories: pairs, suited cards and unsuited

cards. Hands that are not included should be folded with rare exceptions. This chart is for a typical 9-handed game, with a distribution of 2 good players, 3 decent players and 3 bad players. You will have to adjust this chart if there are more good players or more bad players at the table. Against more tough, aggressive players, refrain from getting involved in a pot with drawing hands unless you are quite sure it will be a multiple player pot. Against more passive players, you can take more chances with drawing hands in early position since you will be more confident that the pot will be played by multiple players.

You should also differentiate between passive and aggressive players who act before you or after you. You can see the actions of those that act before you, but you will not know the actions of the players behind you until after you have acted. If the players behind you are generally loose, it means you can be a bit looser and call with some drawing hands. If the players behind you are generally tight, it means you can be a bit more aggressive with the high cards as you won't have to worry about them calling your raise and making it a multiple player pot (a call by any player may encourage other players to call as well). It also means your drawing hands are worth less since you cannot count on the tight players behind you to follow your limp by limping themselves.

The correct strategy for some hands fall in a gray area between two or three decisions. With those hands, all the choices are listed, although my preferred action is listed first. You must choose for yourself based on your own style and how your opponents play. For example, if you do not feel comfortable being the aggressor all the time, especially in early position, you may choose to limp instead of raise if the recommended action on the chart is "Raise / Limp". JJ is such a hand. If you do not feel like mixing it up against tricky players, you may decide to limp in early position (the second option listed for JJ) rather than raise.

Most hands have four rows attached to it. For those with only one row, it means the same strategy should be used in all situations. The four rows fall under the following situations:

1. No one has yet called
2. There are limpers but no raises
3. There is a raise and no other players yet involved
4. There is a raise and at least two other callers

Pair	Early Position	Middle Position	Late Position
AA, KK, QQ	Re-raise	Re-raise	Re-raise
JJ / TT	Raise / Limp	Raise	Raise
	Raise	Raise	Raise
	Re-Raise	Re-Raise	Re-Raise
	N/A	Call	Call
99	Raise/Limp	Raise	Raise
	Limp	Raise	Raise

	Fold	Re-Raise / Call	Re-Raise / Call
	N/A	Call	Call
88 / 77	Raise / Limp	Raise	Raise
	Limp	Limp	Raise
	Fold	Call / Fold	Re-Raise against mid/late position raiser / Fold against earlier raisers
	N/A	Call	Call
66 / 55	Fold / Limp	Fold / Limp	Raise
	Fold / Limp	Limp	Raise / Call
	Fold	Fold	Re-Raise against late position raiser / Fold against earlier raisers
	N/A	Call with 3 or more players already in / Fold	Call with 3 or more players / Fold
44 / 33 / 22	Fold	Fold	Raise
	Fold	Limp	Raise / Call / Fold
	Fold	Fold	Re-Raise/Fold against late position raisers / Fold against earlier raisers
	N/A	Call with 4 or more players already in / Fold	Call with 4 or more players / Fold

Suited Cards	Early Position	Middle Position	Late Position
AKs	Re-Raise	Re-Raise	Re-Raise
AQs	Raise	Raise	Raise
	Raise	Raise	Raise
	Call / Re-Raise	Call / Re-Raise	Re-Raise / Call
	N/A	Call	Call / Re-Raise
AJs	Raise / Limp	Raise	Raise
	Raise / Call	Raise / Call	Raise
	Call / Fold	Call / Fold	Re-Raise / Call / Fold

	N/A	Call	Call
ATs	Limp	Raise	Raise
	Limp	Raise / Call	Raise
	Fold	Fold	Re-Raise / Fold
	N/A	Fold / Call	Call / Fold
A9s / A8s / A7s	Limp / Fold	Raise / Limp	Raise
	Limp	Limp	Limp / Raise
	Fold	Fold	Fold / Re-Raise (re-raise a late position player you think is stealing)
	N/A	Call / Fold	Call
A6s - A2s	Fold	Limp / Fold	Raise
	Fold	Limp	Limp
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold / Call
KQs	Limp / Raise	Raise	Raise
	Call / Raise	Raise	Raise
	Call / Fold	Fold / Call	Re-Raise / Call
	N/A	Call	Call
KJs	Limp	Raise / Limp	Raise
	Limp	Limp / Raise	Raise
	Fold	Fold	Fold / Re-Raise (re-raise a late position player you think is stealing)
	N/A	Fold	Fold
KTs	Fold	Fold	Raise
	Limp	Limp	Limp
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold
K9s - K6s	Fold	Fold	Raise
	Fold	Fold	Limp / Fold
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold

QJs	Fold / Limp	Raise / Limp	Raise
	Limp	Limp	Limp / Raise
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Call	Call
JTs	Limp	Limp / Raise	Raise
	Limp	Limp	Limp / Raise (consider raising against 3 or more limpers, although a limp is fine as well)
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Call	Call
QTs / T9s	Fold / Limp	Limp / Fold	Raise
	Limp	Limp	Limp
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Call / Fold
98s / 87s / 76s	Fold	Fold	Fold
	Fold	Limp	Limp if there are 2 or more limpers
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold
Q9s	Fold	Fold	Raise
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold
J9s / T8s	Fold	Fold	Fold
	Fold	Fold	Limp if there are 2 or more limpers
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold
Q8s	Fold	Fold	Raise
	Fold	Fold	Limp if there are 2 or more limpers
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold

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Unsuited Cards	Early Position	Middle Position	Late Position
AK	Re-Raise	Re-Raise	Re-Raise
AQ	Raise	Raise	Raise
	Raise / Limp	Raise / Limp	Raise if only a couple of limpers / Call against more limpers
	Fold against a tight early position raiser / Re-Raise	Fold against a tight early position raiser / Re-Raise	Fold against a tight early position raiser / Re-Raise
	N/A	Call	Call
AJ	Limp	Raise	Raise
	Limp	Limp	Limp / Raise
	Fold	Fold	Fold / Re-Raise (re-raise a late position player you think is stealing)
	N/A	Fold / Call	Fold / Call
AT	Fold	Raise / Limp	Raise
	Fold	Limp	Limp / Raise against only 1 or 2 weak limpers
	Fold	Fold	Fold / Re-Raise (re-raise a late position player you think is stealing)
	N/A	Fold	Fold
A9	Fold	Fold / Raise	Raise
	Fold	Fold	Limp with only 3 limpers / Raise against 1 limper / Fold against 4 or more limpers
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold
A8 / A7	Fold	Fold	Raise
	Fold	Fold	Limp with only 2 limpers/ Raise against 1 limper / Fold against 3 or more limpers
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold
A6 - A2	Fold	Fold	In the cutoff, raise with A6, A5, Fold with A4 - A2. On the button, raise with A6 - A2
	Fold	Fold	Fold

	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold
KQ	Fold / Limp	Raise	Raise
	Limp	Raise / Limp	Raise
	Fold	Fold	Fold / Call / Re-raise against a late position blind stealer
	N/A	Fold	Fold / Call in a loose game
KJ	Fold	Fold / Raise	Raise
	Fold	Limp / Fold	Limp
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold
KT - K8	Fold	Fold	In the cutoff, Raise with KT and Fold K9 and K8. On the button, raise with KT-K8
	Fold	Fold	Limp with KT, fold K9 and K8
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold
QJ	Fold	Fold	Raise
	Fold	Fold / Limp	Limp
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold
QT	Fold	Fold	Raise on button, otherwise fold
	Fold	Fold	Call
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold
JT / T9	Fold	Fold	Raise on button, otherwise fold
	Fold	Fold	Limp against many limpers
	Fold	Fold	Fold
	N/A	Fold	Fold

Here are charts summarizing the percentage of hands to call, raise and fold with in each position. Each box has four different situations, just like in the starting hands charts above.

	Previous Action	Early Position	Middle Position	Late Position
Call	No other callers	2.4%	2.4%	0.0%
	Limper but no raises	5.6%	11.0%	13.7%
	One raise, no other players yet	0.9%	1.5%	0.0%
	One raise, at least two other callers	N/A	9.2%	10.1%
Average	Call	3.0%	6.0%	6.0%

	Previous Action	Early Position	Middle Position	Late Position
Raise	No other callers	5.1%	11.2%	25.8%
	Limper but no raises	3.8%	6.9%	10.4%
	One raise, no other players yet	2.9%	3.9%	8.3%
	One raise, at least two other callers	N/A	1.2%	1.2%
Average	Raise	3.9%	5.8%	11.4%

	Previous Action	Early Position	Middle Position	Late Position
Fold	No other callers	92.5%	86.4%	74.2%
	Limper but no raises	90.6%	82.1%	75.9%
	One raise, no other players yet	96.2%	94.6%	91.7%
	One raise, at least two other callers	N/A	89.6%	88.7%
Average	Fold	93.1%	88.2%	82.6%

Notes - The Average row measures the average of the four different situations. It does not weight the probability of each situation occurring. In late position, it is more common to be faced with a raise (the 3rd and 4th situations) than the other two situations. The average numbers in this chart do not reflect this, but it is still a useful way to view the differences in the positions.

Calling in Late Position vs Calling in Middle Position

I advocate playing many more hands in late position compared to middle position. In late position, the chart shows to call or raise with 17.4% of all situations, while in middle position only call or raise with 11.8% of all situations. Raisable hands increase from 5.8% (middle position) to 11.4%

(late position), while callable hands stay the same at 6.0%. In fact, two of the calling categories decrease to 0% in late position. In the situations of “When there are no other callers” and “When there is just one raise and no other players yet”, I suggest never calling in either case when in late position. In those situations, you should either fold or raise. Notice the big jump in the situation of “When there are no other callers” from raising with 11.2% of the hands in middle position to raising with 25.8% of the hands in late position. Hands such as K♦T♥ and Q♣J♥ are now raisable hands from the button if no one else has come in, but were hands that should be mucked in middle position.

Stealing the Blinds

When you are in late position and everyone has folded, you need to decide if you should raise or fold (do not call). Here are some factors to consider when trying to steal the blinds.

1. How likely are you to have the best hand?

When everyone else has folded and you are in late position, the better hands are the high card hands. As discussed in a previous section, this is the position where a high card hand like ATo is better than a drawing hand like T9s.

2. How loose are the blinds?

It is usually best to play against players that are loose. However, when you are trying to steal the blinds, it is not always the case. The tighter players may be more willing to give up and fold their blinds when you raise. When you are trying to steal the blinds, this makes you happy. But the looser players will call more often. Some of these loose players will give up so much edge after the Flop with poor play that you will not mind when they call pre-Flop. However, if they are loose pre-Flop but play decently after the Flop, then you would not be happy. Against this type of player, you should limit the hands that you try to steal the blinds with.

3. How aggressive are the blinds?

If the blinds are aggressive, then they may play back at you if they think you are trying to steal their blinds. In particular, the small blind has more reason to re-raise since he will usually prefer to have the big blind fold. If they are aggressive, it means you will often have to put in three bets instead of two when you are stealing the blinds. Against the aggressive players, you will have to limit your blind stealing hands.

4. How well do the blinds play post-Flop?

If the blinds play well post-Flop, then there is less value in trying to steal blinds.

5. How tight do the blinds play on the Flop?

If the blinds play tight on the Flop, but call raises before the Flop liberally, then a blind stealing raise is worthwhile. Although they will fold pre-Flop less often, this type of player will be more willing to check and fold on the Flop.

6. How predictable are your opponents?

Predictable players are always better to play against. If your opponents are predictable, then you can be sure that if you are re-raised before the Flop or check-raised on the Flop that you are actually beat. If they are unpredictable, it is more difficult to play against them. Try to steal the

blinds of the predictable players more often than the blinds of the unpredictable players.

7. How often have you been raising the blinds in the last few rounds?

If you have been raising the blinds often in the last few rounds (whether or not those raises were legitimate raises or blind stealing raises), then you should be a bit more conservative when you are in the position to steal the blinds again. Your opponents will start to feel that you are taking advantage of them if you keep raising their blinds, and they will be more likely to call your raises.

Playing the Blinds: To Defend or Not to Defend

You will often be in the blinds when a late position player has open-raised. You have to decide whether or not to defend your blind hand by calling. Here are some factors to consider when a late position player raises in an apparent blind stealing opportunity

1. How likely are you to have the best hand?

If you think you have the best hand, you should consider re-raising, especially if you are in the small blind. By re-raising, you will put even more pressure on the big blind and take control of the pot. If the blind stealer's hand is weak, he may meekly fold on the Flop when you bet out.

2. How often will your opponent attempt to steal the blinds with unwarranted hands?

If your opponent is constantly open-raising in late position, then you need to loosen up and call with more hands. You will also need to play more aggressively and raise back when you have decent hands that you may not normally raise back with. You do not want anyone to push you around at the poker table, and in the blinds is a spot when other players are looking to push you around.

3. How well does your opponent play post-Flop?

If your opponent plays well after the Flop, then he will be more difficult to play against. When you are in a blind position, you will always be in a worse position than your opponent and you will have to act first. A good post-Flop player will be able to take advantage of his position, so you have to a bit more selective.

4. How predictable is your opponent?

As always, playing against predictable players is better than playing against unpredictable players. Given all else equal, tend to call raises against predictable players more than against unpredictable players.

Sunk Cost and the Blinds

Many people think they need to defend their blinds all the time because they have already partially called and are getting to see a Flop at a 50% discount compared to other players. This is an incorrect thought process. It is important to think of the blinds that you had put up as part of the pot, not part of your stack. The chips you put up for the blinds are a sunk cost. You had to put them up regardless of the strength of your hand. Of course you have equity in the pot as well as the other players, however, if your starting hand is poor, there is no reason to put in good money after bad money.

Varying your play

In games where you may be facing the same opponents routinely, it is useful to vary your play with

starting hands to some degree. In certain situations you won't have to adjust at all, such as when everyone has folded to you in late position. If your strategy is close to the chart suggested in this book, then you would be raising with about 25% of your hands in those situations. With that many different hands, it is no longer necessary to vary your play on purpose to throw off your opponents. When you are raising with 25% of your hands, your hand is already unpredictable to your opponent.

The times that you may want to vary your play is when the pot has yet to be raised and you have a drawing type of hand. It is important for the pot not to have been raised by another player because it means it is less likely for anyone else to have a premium hand. With a drawing type of hand, you can still make some nice hands and may surprise your opponents. For example, open-raising instead of calling in middle position with a hand like Q♣T♣ or T♠9♠ once in a while is useful. But you cannot do it too often. It is less worthwhile to do it from the early positions because there are so many more players yet to act when you are in early position. If one of the players behind you has a premium hand, then a raise in early position with a drawing hand is too costly.

Don't be worried about giving away info pre-Flop in Early Position

Don't be worried about giving away too much information by your pre-Flop play in early position. Since there are so many players to act behind you, it is too difficult to try to be deceptive without giving up too much edge. There are too many players you would need to fool one way or another. The players who know what a raise from a tight early position player means (hopefully this describes you), will fold, and you will not be able to extract value out of them. But in typical games, there should be enough players who are willing to call a raise with dominated hands such as AJo and KQo that it is still worthwhile to be raising in early position with your best hands.

In tougher games where there are more players who are willing to fold decent cards against a tight early position raiser, you may decide to limp in with some of your stronger hands. If there are many players who will fold AQo to a raise by you in the under the gun position (as you would), then when you raise with AA, you will not gain anything from them. But if you limp in with the intention to check-raise, then you would likely have trapped a player with a hand that he would not have played if he knew the real strength of your hand.

Common Mistakes made with Starting Hands in Different Positions

Early Position Play Common Mistake: Suited Connectors and Middle/Small Pairs

A common mistake that players make with suited connectors and middle to small pairs in early position is that they either always fold or always call with these hands. Instead of one fixed strategy, players should be more flexible and adjust to their environment. The decision to limp with these drawing hands should be dependent on how the other players play and the mood of the table. If you can count on other players limping along with you and the mood is a happy-go-lucky table, then that means you can be more confident that the pot will be contested by multiple players.

When this happens, you will have enough pot odds to limp in and see the Flop. A problem occurs when you are not quite sure if others will limp along after you limp, so it is important to size up the other players before you are faced with a drawing hand in an early position. If it is a fairly tough table with a few professional players in it, these drawing hands may be completely unplayable. If you cannot expect to get many other callers then you are not going to be able to put yourself into

the position to get enough pot odds for your limp to be correct. On the other hand, typically in low limit games such as 2-4, 3-6 and 5-10, the atmosphere of the game and the general personality of the players will usually allow for a limp with a drawing hand to be correct. In those games, you will be more confident you can get into a multiple player pot.

Middle Position Play Common Mistake: Don't limp along with non-drawing hands

A common mistake many players make is to limp in middle position, without holding a drawing hand, after a horde of players have limped into the pot. If you are in middle position and three other players have limped, you can limp along with hands like 9♣8♣ and A♦5♦. But other hands that may be as strong or stronger in other situations will not play as well in multiple player pots like this. Such hands include A♣7♥ and K♠9♣, which should be thrown away in this spot. These are good hands to raise as a late position blind stealing hand, but they have major problems in multiple player pots. The problems include kicker problems (others may be limping with dominating hands like A♠9♦, K♥J♥) and drawing problems (if you make a straight with either A♣7♥ or K♠9♣, it is possible that someone has a better straight).

Late Position Play Common Mistake: Calling raises with high cards

In an earlier section of this chapter, I discussed the issue of calling with AQo against a tight early position raiser. The same concept applies to other hands in late position when a middle position player raises. Often, players will indiscriminately call raises with hands such as K♣Q♠ and A♦T♣. If the raiser is a reasonable player with reasonable raising standards and is raising from middle position, then typically these hands should be folded. Oftentimes a legitimate raiser will have dominating hand over K♣Q♠ and A♦T♣ with hands such as A♣K♠ and A♥Q♥. Calling a raise when there is a good chance you are either dominated or facing a big pair is not a pleasant way to play poker.

On the other hand if you are on the button and an aggressive player open-raises in the cutoff seat, you can consider re-raising with K♣Q♠ and A♦T♣. The difference is that the player in the cutoff is raising with a wide variety of hands. Calling a raise gives the blinds too much equity to call and see the Flop. It would be better to re-raise and play the hand heads-up because you likely have the best hand and these hands play better in heads-up situations.

General Common Mistake: Not being careful with pre-Flop calling standards

It is easy to loosen up and add to the hands you play. If you often limp with T9s, it is easy to take a step back and also limp in with similar hands, such as T8s and 98s. Once you have made that move, it becomes easy to also limp in with hands that resemble 98s, such as 98o. This is dangerous. You have gone from limping with a borderline hand such as T9s to limping with an unwarranted hand such as 98o. This is one of the dangers of playing marginal or borderline hands. It is may not be the hands themselves that are dangerous, but what they can represent when you get a hand that may look similar in quality but is not.